

Through the Years

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Through the Years

by [Rina \(rinadoll\)](#)

Summary

Kristy, Mary Anne, and a promise remembered.

Notes

Timeline notes: Since the series ended in 2000, I let that be the year they finally graduated from SMS and were allowed to age.

I hope this is to your liking, shihadchick!! I had fun hanging out with these characters again.

<3

Kristy had had the best idea. She'd made up an obstacle course in her backyard with toys and garden furniture. All she needed was someone to race against. Charlie was busy with David Michael, and Sam was at his friend's house. She wanted to find Mary Anne, but she wasn't anywhere.

Kristy huffed and her bangs flew up. She stood with her hands on her hips and thought. Where could Mary Anne be hiding? She could ask Claudia to play, but Mary Anne was more fun. She let Kristy make a lot of the rules for the games they played. She was a lot like Tacy in the Betsy-Tacy books Mom was reading her and Sam. Only Mary Anne didn't have any brothers or sisters, which always made Kristy sad for her.

But that wasn't helping Kristy find her. Mary Anne's babysitter was no help, and that made Kristy mad. Charlie always knew where to find them, no matter how well she and Sam hid. Charlie was a better babysitter than the yucky old lady Mary Anne had.

Kristy went through the house one last time, peeking under beds and into closets.

Success! She finally found her hiding deep in the linen closet, almost entirely covered by sheets. Only her pigtails peeked out. Kristy threw the sheets behind her and Mary Anne's tear stained face appeared.

"What happened?" Kristy asked. Mary Anne cried a lot, but she didn't usually hide.

"Pete said that he wouldn't marry me at the playground today," Mary Anne said, sniffing.

"Is that all?" Kristy asked. "Who cares about getting married?"

"I do," Mary Anne wailed, her lip wobbling. "I like weddings. And he said no one would ever ask to marry me even when I'm all grown up, because I'm a whiny crybaby." She started crying again.

Kristy did sometimes think Mary Anne was a crybaby. But she wasn't whiny and Kristy hated anyone who made her cry extra.

"He's nothing but a meanie," Kristy said. "He's just scared no one will want to marry him, because he's a jerk. If you want to get married, you will. And they would be really lucky to marry you."

"Really?" Mary Anne sniffled again.

"You're really nice, and you're fun to play with, and you give good hugs. I would marry you, if I had to marry anyone." Then she had another great idea. "If we're not married when we're really old, like 30, then I'll marry you. Okay? You'll be married if you want to be." Kristy didn't know why anyone would want to get married, it had just made her mom sad, but it was an easy problem to solve.

Mary Anne wiped at her face. "Okay. But you have to ask me or it doesn't count."

“Now?” Kristy asked, confused.

“Yes,” Mary Anne said. “Or else we won’t really be future engaged.”

“Okay.” Kristy felt weird, but she knelt down like she had seen in the movies. “Mary Anne Spier, will you future marry me?”

“Yes!” Mary Anne launched at her for a hug. “Thanks, Kristy. You’re the bestest.”

“You’re welcome,” Kristy said, hugging back. “Now listen to this idea.”

“You made this look too easy,” Kristy said, accusingly. She crossed her arms and her eyes at Mary Anne, whose prom gown was bagged and sitting next to her on the couch. Mary Anne had found her dream dress, a floaty, sea-green chiffon thing that made her look like she’d stepped out of the 1950s, within fifteen minutes. Kristy was sailing past an hour, with an entire rack of rejected dresses and a saleslady who had gotten less pleasant by the half hour. “Maybe I should just cancel.”

“No canceling,” Mary Anne said emphatically. “Maybe you should branch out from all the black. What color is Sarah wearing?”

Kristy blinked. “How should I know?” she asked. “I’m shopping with you, not her.”

“You need to complement each other,” Mary Anne said, sighing. She pulled out her phone and sent a text to Kristy’s girlfriend. It buzzed a moment later. “She’s in purple. So no red, but maybe try blue? Or green?”

Kristy made a face. “I guess,” she said. “Blue could be okay.”

Another 45 minutes and she discovered that blue was not actually okay. At least not in these styles, which made her feel itchy and wrong. Mary Anne was waiting patiently on the couch outside the dressing rooms and she flopped down next to her, letting her head rest on her shoulder. “Please let me cancel?” she asked. “This is hell.”

“Sarah can’t wait to dance with you,” Mary Anne said, wrapping her arm around her.

Kristy sighed. “You play dirty.”

“Have to, around you,” Mary Anne said, cheerfully. Her arm tightened around Kristy’s shoulder. “I think I have an idea.”

“Burlap sack?” Kristy asked. “Because that’s what we’re getting down to.”

“Better than a sack,” Mary Anne said. “Wait here.” She headed for the snippy sales lady and started talking. The lady didn’t look impressed, but Mary Anne crossed her arms and kept talking.

Kristy smiled as the sales lady finally nodded and they walked off. Even a year ago, she couldn’t imagine Mary Anne pushing back on the sales lady like that, but today, she was grateful for it. She felt too out of her league to know where to begin.

Mary Anne reappeared, striding over with a bounce in her step and smile on her face. “Lillian is getting it all set up,” she said. “Let’s take a ten minute break, get some caffeine, and come back refreshed.”

“I think Lillian needs the break,” Kristy said, but let Mary Anne pull her to her feet.

Getting out of the stuffy store and fortifying herself with espresso did help, and Kristy felt a little less hopeless as she dragged herself back into Bellair’s.

“So here’s my suggestion,” Mary Anne said. “You hate dresses. You have always hated dresses. You’re probably always going to hate them. Why are you forcing yourself into them?”

“So I can take my girlfriend to prom and everyone from you and Sarah to my family has said no to jeans?” Kristy said. The “Duh” was heavily implied, she felt, and Mary Anne rolled her eyes.

“I’m still saying no to jeans,” Mary Anne said. “Ignore half the men you see on the red carpet these days, they don’t know how to dress appropriately. But don’t ignore the other half.” She pulled Kristy back into the dressing room, where an array of suits were hanging up.

Kristy’s mouth dropped open. “Really?” she asked. “This isn’t cheating?”

“Yeah, it’s totally cheating to be wearing something that makes you feel good and have fun at your senior prom,” Mary Anne said. “That’s why I dragged you through over an hour of trying on clothes to find something you liked.”

“Sarcasm does not become you,” Kristy said, already excitedly stripping.

Mary Anne laughed and hung up Kristy’s jeans and UConn Huskies softball tshirt. “I’ll be back on the couch, waiting with baited breath.”

And in fifteen minutes, Kristy also had the prom outfit of her dreams. She discovered quickly that she wasn’t a fan of suit jackets, but she and Mary Anne agreed on a grey and black waistcoat over a sky blue blouse and grey trousers. It was comfortable and she loved it.

“And now we get shoes,” Mary Anne announced and Kristy groaned.

The night of prom, Mary Anne came over early to get ready at the mansion. Kristy perched on the bathroom counter as Mary Anne did her makeup--she’d never cared enough to have gotten the hang of doing it herself, but liked it well enough when one of her friends or sisters wanted to practice on her.

She glanced in the mirror when Mary Anne finished and grinned. It was mostly subtle, but she liked how it looked. She even liked the red lipstick Mary Anne had suggested she try; it was punchy.

“Approve?” Mary Anne asked.

“100%,” Kristy said, smacking a kiss on her cheek. Mary Anne laughed and swiped at the mark.

“Careful,” she warned. “Stay put only stays put so much.”

“Roger that,” Kristy said. She ran off to get dressed while Mary Anne started her own makeup. Their dates were coming in an hour to pick them up for dinner with the rest of the gay-straight alliance she’d started, the same group they’d be hanging out with after the dance. She’d learned quickly that she needed the structure a club of her own provided, and at least this one seemed poised to live on past her time in the school.

Kristy was dressed and flipping through an old photo album when Mary Anne finally came in. “Well?” she asked, spinning around. The skirt floated up around her, but her neat pincurls miraculously stayed put.

Kristy stared at her. “You’re beautiful,” she said, finally, and Mary Anne beamed at her.

They stood together in front of the mirror. Kristy had lost the fight to wear black Converse, but won the no heel argument, so she was in oxfords. Mary Anne had embraced heels, so Kristy only came up to her shoulder.

“We make quite the pair,” Mary Anne said. “A very dapper pair.” She smiled, but Kristy couldn’t meet her eyes in the reflection.

“I’m going to miss you,” Kristy blurted out, feeling and watching her cheeks pinken.

“It’s going to be so weird not seeing you every day,” Mary Anne said. “But I am not crying, not crying, not crying, so stop it.” She blinked furiously. “That’s for graduation. And August. It’s only May. No crying at prom.” She hugged Kristy tightly. “But I know what you mean.”

“Just promise me we’re really going to be friends always,” Kristy said, her heart beating fast. She hated this, she hadn’t felt like this since SMS graduation, and she’d thought she was keeping it together better this time around. “Not like we are with Stacey and Claudia, just seeing them sometimes in class or the GSA. I mean, real friends.” Her voice wavered and she bit her lip.

Mary Anne touched her lip gently. “Don’t do that, it’ll smudge,” she warned. “Kristy, you’ve been my best friend for almost twenty years now. We’ve hit every milestone together, and that’s not going to go away overnight. I mean, you were even my first proposal. We’re going to drive our roommates crazy with how often we call, email and visit each other.”

Kristy finally met Mary Anne’s eyes. “You remember that?” she asked. “We were practically babies.”

“A girl doesn’t forget her first marriage proposal,” Mary Anne said sternly, shaking her head. “Honestly.” She grinned at her. “See, there you go. We have to at least be friends until we’re 30, so we can find out if we’re stuck together or not. Crisis averted.”

“Girls! Sarah and Josh are here!” Watson called up the stairs.

“Our chariots await,” Mary Anne said, offering Kristy her arm. “C’mon, bestie. Let’s dance.”

Kristy laid in bed, feeling dizzy, and not just because of the alcohol.

She had known Mary Anne her entire life. They’d stayed in constant touch since high school, and hung out every break. They still called each other best friends, and Kristy at least always meant it. College hadn’t seemed to change Mary Anne at all. She still cried at sappy romances and anything with animals, she was still quiet, she was still Mary Anne.

And yet here they were.

After three semesters of poli sci in Connecticut, Kristy had transferred to Mary Anne’s college when she realized what she really wanted was a business program. Her business classes had made her the most happy, and Northwestern had a great program for her to get into after undergrad. It just made sense. Mary Anne had seemed enthusiastic about the switch, and even suggested they be roommates in the fall.

Mary Anne had suggested they go out to celebrate Kristy’s first weekend there, and Kristy had been surprised when Mary Anne took her to a bar. She’d never seen Mary Anne with alcohol before, because she’d never drank at any parties, high school or college, but somehow, Mary Anne Spier had a fake ID.

They’d barely gotten settled at a table when Mary Anne had looked nervous, started to say something, and then jumped to her feet.

A tall, dark-haired woman had walked up and Mary Anne wrapped her arm around her and dropped her bombshell. “Kristy, this is Meredith. My girlfriend. Merrie, this is Kristy.”

“Best friend and founder of many clubs,” Meredith said, holding out her hand. “I’ve heard so much about you, I’m glad you’re finally here.”

There were very few times Kristy had ever been speechless.

Mary Anne with a girlfriend? She had seen Mary Anne with a girl before, kind of. Mary Anne had danced with both Kristy and Sarah at prom. Did that count? Maybe it counted. It was a little less shocking than the fake ID, at least. She realized that Meredith's hand was still hanging and quickly grabbed it.

“I’ve heard nothing about you,” she blurted. Mary Anne winced and Meredith’s face fell. She glanced at Mary Anne, confused, and Kristy immediately felt guilty.

“No, no, that came out wrong,” Kristy said, quickly. “That drink from your neighbor must have been stronger than I thought. I meant, obviously, I’ve heard nothing but good things about you. Meredith.”

Meredith had smiled, said something about Kate’s heavy hand with the vodka, and things mostly got better from there. Mary Anne had avoided her gaze for the most part, and Kristy had drunk more than she normally did. Mary Anne had nursed her one drink for most of the night, with occasional sips from Meredith’s, which seemed like a Mary Anne thing to do, if

she was going to use a fake ID. She was still Mary Anne, just a little more grown up. And away. From Kristy.

Which hurt. A lot. She tossed and turned most of the night, unable to fall asleep and hating the twinges of jealousy that she felt. Meredith got to know this part of Mary Anne that Kristy didn't, and there had never been a part of Mary Anne that Kristy didn't know.

She finally fell asleep after 6, and was woken by a knock on her door. She groaned and squinted at her clock--it was almost noon.

She answered the door and found Mary Anne holding a big bottle of water and a steaming cup of coffee. "I thought you might need these this morning," she said, holding them up. "I have Tylenol, too."

Kristy grabbed the coffee and waved her in.

"Do you want to talk about it now or later?" Mary Anne asked, perching herself on Kristy's roommate's chair while Kristy swallowed down the Tylenol and chugged the water.

Kristy wasn't even sure where to start. She drank more coffee and the silence stretched.

"Are you mad?" Mary Anne asked, tightening her hands.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Kristy asked. "I mean, I'm gay. It's not like I'm going to tell you to stay away from me or anything. I could have helped you."

"I didn't need help," Mary Anne said, and Kristy felt a flare of hurt again. "I had a really good role model." She smiled at Kristy and Kristy couldn't help smiling back.

"It's not really new, though Merrie is," Mary Anne continued. "I've known for a long time that I was, at best, mostly straight, and that was fine. And then I met Merrie in class last fall, and I realized that I was underestimating how much I liked girls too. We started dating at Halloween. So it hasn't been that long at all. I didn't mean to hide it, I just didn't know what to say. You kept talking about how great it was to be single, all semester."

Kristy winced. She'd been dumped by her last girlfriend when she'd applied to Northwestern, and had maybe piled that on too thick. "Does anyone know?"

"Dad and Sharon," Mary Anne said. "They were great about it, of course. Sharon was just surprised that--" Mary Anne broke off and sighed. "She wasn't surprised at all, really. And I guess that made me a little self-conscious, too. I was going to tell you before Merrie showed up, that was a surprise for me, too."

"Any other secrets?" Kristy asked. "Anything you're holding back on?"

Mary Anne shook her head. "No, I promise. You're caught up on everything." She paused. "Oh, wait, I take it back."

"Are you moving in with her?" Kristy asked, hating the twist in her stomach.

“Kristy!” Mary Anne laughed. “It’s been 2 months. I am still planning to be your roommate in August, I promise. No, this more serious than that.” She paused and Kristy held her breath. “You know, of course, about the Wildcats softball team. You’re trying out, right?” Kristy nodded. “Well, I didn’t tell you that there’s also three roller derby teams nearby. Surprise!”

“Mary Anne!” Kristy threw a pillow at her. “Don’t scare me like that.” She threw her other one at her, too, and Mary Anne ducked, laughing. “Seriously, though. Three?”

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Northwestern turned out to be a perfect fit for Kristy. She thrived in classes, enjoyed groups and sports, and loved being back with Mary Anne. They spent most days together, or with Merrie, and since Kristy’s roommate spent most nights with her boyfriend, Mary Anne often spent the night with Kristy.

As far as Kristy was concerned, life was perfect. Yes, it would be nice to have a girlfriend, but though Merrie had introduced her to several girls and she’d met others, nothing clicked. With Merrie and Mary Anne, though, she never lacked for a social life.

Then one spring Friday she came back to her dorm and found Mary Anne sagged against her door. “Mary Anne?” Kristy asked. “What happened?”

“She broke up with me,” Mary Anne said and burst into tears. Again, from the state of her face.

“I’m sorry,” Kristy said, helping her up. “What do you need? Want me to go beat her up? I’m a Derby girl now, I could take her.”

She probably couldn’t, so it was handy that what Mary Anne needed was really sad movies. By their second go-through of Titanic (with Casablanca, Romeo and Juliet, West Side Story, Love Story, Moulin Rouge and Kissing Jessica Stein in between--it had been a very, very long weekend for Kristy), they were curled up together on Kristy’s bed, Mary Anne snuggled in Kristy’s arms. She was a good fit, despite their relatively comparable sizes.

“There are no happy endings,” Mary Anne sniffled, as the ship started to tilt out of the water.

Kristy rolled her eyes, but kept stroking her arm, as she had been for the last two hours. Not that she was counting. “Of course there are. You’re just focusing on the sad ones.”

“Because they are most realistic,” Mary Anne said. “Everyone dies. What’s the point?”

Kristy sat up. “Okay. Change of plans. We are finishing this weekend on a hopeful note.” She crawled out of bed and went to her shelf of DVDs. She popped out Titanic over Mary Anne’s protests and put in the only romantic comedy she’d ever really enjoyed--Imagine Me and You.

“Watch,” she ordered, climbing back into place.

By the end, Mary Anne was sobbing again and Kristy sighed. “This was supposed to make you feel a little better,” she said.

"It does," Mary Anne said, turning and burying her face in Kristy's shoulder. "They're so cute and ha-aaa-ppy." She cried harder.

Kristy shook her head and pressed a kiss to Mary Anne's hair. She loved this crazy lady.

Kristy and Mary Anne moved in together junior year and that was it. They lived together the rest of undergrad, and found an apartment together for grad school, too. Their friends teased them that they were like an old married couple. Somehow, the few people they dated never found this quite as amusing.

"Our last winter break," Mary Anne said, wistfully, as they packed for Stoneybrook.

"If you end up in schools, you'll always get one," Kristy said. Mary Anne had gone from her bachelor's in education to a master's program to be a children's librarian, hopefully a school librarian. "I'm the poor sucker who will never get a break again."

"You should have planned better," Mary Anne teased. "But it won't be the same, anyway."

Kristy knew what she meant. She had never really gotten better at transitions, and this was the biggest of them all. "At least we'll still be together."

"Always," Mary Anne said cheerfully.

Except that turned out to be a big, fat lie.

"I can't believe you applied for a job in New York," Kristy said, angrily. "We agreed to stay in Chicago for now. I accepted that job downtown yesterday!"

"I'm sorry," Mary Anne said, biting her lip. "I am, honestly. I only applied because my professor knew the principal there and she wanted me to. I never thought it was a real possibility, especially since they had to interview me over the phone. But Kristy, it's hard to find a job as a librarian. There aren't many open, and I haven't gotten any offers here. I've tried so hard, all year. Public libraries, public schools, private schools, the Field Museum! No one is hiring me, and now it's August. People aren't going to be hiring for the school year much longer and I need a job. And now I have one."

"So you're taking it? You're not even considering still trying here? You just got your degree a few months ago! There's still time. We can figure this out," Kristy said, thinking fast. "You can get another part-time job at a preschool, right?"

"I want to be a librarian," Mary Anne said, frustrated. "I don't want to cobble together a handful of jobs with no insurance or days off. I want to start my career, and this place is my chance. I heard from River Grove today, and they went with someone else. I don't have any other options. So, yes, I am taking the job." She sighed. "I'll keep applying for openings here, too. The contract is only for a year to start. I could be back next fall."

"Or you could be in New York because they'd be crazy to let you go." Kristy felt like crying, which she hated. "When are you leaving?"

“Two weeks,” Mary Anne said. “I talked to Dad and Sharon, and I’ll stay with them until I find a place of my own. I’m thinking Brooklyn, maybe.”

Kristy looked at her, in her cat print dress and big glasses. “You’ll fit right in.” She didn’t really mean it as a compliment, which she could tell Mary Anne noticed.

“Thank you,” she said, anyway. “I think I’ll like it. For now. It’ll be an adventure.”

“Great,” Kristy said. “Have fun with that.” She grabbed her mitt and stormed out the door to softball practice.

The next two weeks both dragged and sped by, which Kristy felt wasn’t even fair. Mary Anne spent it packing up her stuff and going out with friends for goodbye get-togethers and dinner parties. Kristy spent it mostly avoiding her. She found herself a small apartment on the green line that she could afford on her own and started slowly moving her stuff over there.

For Mary Anne’s last night, their friend Ally had invited a few of their closest friends over for dinner and drinks, exactly the kind of quiet night out Mary Anne liked best.

Mary Anne knocked on Kristy’s door at 6. “It’s almost time to head over to Al’s,” she said through the door. “Are you ready?”

Kristy opened the door and squared her shoulders. “Sorry, can’t make it,” she said. “I have a date.”

Mary Anne looked like she’d been kicked in the stomach, and Kristy felt a flash of guilt. “You’re not coming?” she asked, her voice sounding watery.

“Sorry,” Kristy said.

“No, you’re not,” Mary Anne said, cheeks turning pink even as a few tears fell. “I can’t believe you. You’re being stubborn, and mean, and a total jerk, Kristy. I’m sorry things aren’t going your way, but I never thought you would be so small and petty. Enjoy your date. Enjoy your new job. See you around, I guess.” She left, door slamming behind her, and Kristy felt terrible.

But not terrible enough to go after her. Or maybe too terrible to go after her. Mary Anne left the next day, and Kristy started her new normal. She threw herself into her job, which she loved, and increased her time with derby and coaching the girls softball team. Her friends and teammates initially teased her about missing her other half and asked after Mary Anne, but stopped when it became clear that Kristy wasn’t going to tolerate it.

And she didn’t really know, either. She hadn’t called, texted or emailed Mary Anne since she left, Mary Anne’s Facebook stayed quiet, and she only heard a little from others. Her mother told her when Mary Anne found an apartment and left town, and Stacey said they’d had lunch and that Mary Anne liked her job.

It was the longest they’d ever gone without contact, and Kristy hated it. She was always reaching for her phone to text Mary Anne about something, or wanting to share stories when

she got home. She never got used to coming home to an empty place--she hadn't realized how much she appreciated coming home to baked goods, or music playing, or just her best friend. So much for having to be friends until they were 30. Her heart hurt at the memory.

She couldn't bring herself to take the first step, though. Mary Anne was right, she was small and petty. She at least had all the friends they'd made the past few years. Mary Anne was on her "adventure" alone, even if she did apparently still see old friends sometimes. She tried to put that out of her thoughts, but it rarely worked.

She got through both their birthdays, missing their traditions. She got through Halloween, the first time in years she hadn't had a partner for a costume. She got through Thanksgiving, which she spent in Chicago since she didn't have enough time off to go home. She pulled out Christmas boxes to decorate, only to realize that most of the stuff she was used to seeing, and even some of her favorites, had apparently been Mary Anne's and was gone.

Her job shut down for the week between Christmas and New Years, so she flew home, only a little nervously. Everyone had made it back: Charlie and his wife and daughter, Sam and his girlfriend, David Michael and Karen home from college, with Karen and Andrew staying over, and Emily Michelle still at home. They hadn't gotten the full Thomas-Brewer clan together in years, so her mother and Watson were thrilled. Kristy was glad to see everyone, too, but her thoughts kept drifting to Mary Anne. Was she in town, or still in New York? Would they run into each other?

"Are you going to see the girls while you're home?" her mom asked, coming into the living room where Kristy was curled up with a book Karen had given her on Dottie Kamenshek and the AAGPBL. "Either BSC or GSA."

"I don't know," Kristy said. "Shannon's in Europe. Claudia and I talked about lunch but didn't set anything up. I don't know if anyone else is here this week."

"I ran into Mary Anne, Dawn and Mallory at Starbucks yesterday," her mom said, and Kristy stiffened. "Kristy, what happened between you and Mary Anne?"

"We had a fight," Kristy admitted. "We agreed to stay in Chicago, but then she left." She felt the old familiar ache all over again.

"It's not the first time you two were in different states," her mother reminded her. "You did fine then. Why the fight now?"

"We had an agreement," Kristy insisted. "We had plans, we were going to start our lives together and then she went and left me!"

She blinked in surprise as her mom raised her eyebrows. "That sounds serious," she said. "Maybe you should talk to her about that."

Kristy felt everything snap into place in her brain. "Yeah. I think I should."

But how do you tell your best friend that you flipped out and stopped talking to her because you were in love with her?

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Directly, she ultimately decided. The next morning, she stopped by the florist to pick up a bouquet and drove over to Burnt Hill Road. She took a deep breath before ringing the doorbell, hoping Mary Anne would be the one to answer the door.

She was and Kristy let out a breath in relief. "I'm so sorry," she said, before Mary Anne could say anything. "You're right, I was being small and petty and stubborn and mean. I was hurt, and so I hurt you, and I should never have done that. Or waited three months to apologize. I've been sorry since August, and I'm sorry for not saying so earlier, too. I love you." She thrust the flowers at Mary Anne.

Mary Anne took the flowers and stared at them for a moment. "I've missed you," she said, finally looking up at Kristy. "I want to tell you to take your flowers and stuff them, but I've missed you so much. Jerk."

Kristy beamed at her. "I was! I am. But I'm going to make it up to you. If you'll let me."

"Of course I will," Mary Anne said, bringing the flowers up to her nose. "These are a good start. I love them, and I love you, too."

"About that," Kristy said, her heart beating fast. "I meant it. In, like, the I'm in love with you way. And I don't know if you're dating anyone right now, or if you could ever feel the same way, but I am, and that's part of why I was upset, and I just wanted you to know that."

"Oh!" Mary Anne's eyes widened. "I-I see."

Kristy's heart sank. "So, there we are. I'll let you take care of those, and I'll email you to catch up, okay? It was good to see you." She started backing away from the door.

"Kristy Thomas," Mary Anne said, exasperated, grabbing at her sleeve. "You don't get to drop that and run." Kristy sheepishly stopped and let Mary Anne drag her to the porch swing. They sat there for a minute in silence, slowly rocking.

"So, for the record, back when I told Dad and Sharon that I was dating a woman, Sharon couldn't believe it wasn't you. She said we'd clearly been crushing on each other for years. Which was one of the reasons I waited to tell you, because I hadn't realized I'd been so obvious and I pretty clearly thought you didn't feel the same way." Mary Anne twisted her hands, and Kristy put hers on top.

"I didn't really understand it until yesterday," she admitted. "But I think it's been coming for a long time for me, and I didn't know how to see it." She squeezed Mary Anne's hand. "I realized that I've always thought of you as my partner. My beautiful, wonderful partner. I want to be yours, too, in all ways."

Mary Anne shifted and considered her a moment. Kristy met her gaze nervously, but then Mary Anne was leaning in and kissing her. "Yes. I think I'd like that," Mary Anne said, nodding.

They grinned goofily at each other before Kristy pulled her in for another kiss, and then another. "Can I take you out on a date?" she asked when they finally broke apart. "What are you doing New Year's Eve?"

Kristy had been right, Mary Anne's school renewed her contract. For two years, they made the long distance work, and then Kristy was able to transfer to Manhattan. They found a cozy little place together, adopted a cat to join Tigger in his old age, and settled in.

"Hey, I had an idea," Mary Anne said. She was wearing one of Kristy's favorite dresses, the only animal print item Mary Anne owned that Kristy liked. It wasn't what she'd been wearing half an hour ago, and Kristy muted the game on tv.

"Yeah? Let's hear," Kristy said.

"Your mom sent me this last week," Mary Anne said, showing her the piece of paper with a drawing of the two of them in wedding dresses. "She found it going through some old boxes for Sam and Jill."

Kristy grinned as she took it. "I remember this. You gave it to me after I proposed."

"Yes," Mary Anne said, looking relieved. "And look at the date on the back. It was right about now, 22 years ago. So it's practically our anniversary."

"Another one?" Kristy asked, laughing. "I think we're up to four now."

"Milestones are important to remember, Kristy," Mary Anne said automatically. She shook her head. "Don't get me off topic. You got to do this last time, so it's my turn now," Mary Anne said. She knelt in front of Kristy, who stared at her, mouth open.

"It turns out that I don't need to wait until I'm 30 to know that you're the one I want to be with for the rest of my life, and I hope you feel the same way. Kristy, will you marry me?" Mary Anne pulled out a ring, a woven band with no decorations.

Kristy stared at the ring, and then back at Mary Anne. One of the reasons they'd decided to get Kristy to New York instead of trying to get Mary Anne a job in Chicago was that they could get married here, but she'd always thought she'd be the one proposing. But that was a ridiculous thing to be thinking now, when she should be answering.

"Yes, of course," she said, voice shaking. "Mary Anne, of course."

Mary Anne burst into tears and Kristy slid the ring on before wrapping Mary Anne in a hug.

"Definitely one of your best ideas yet," Kristy said, grinning. "I only wish I'd thought of it first." She wiped away some of the tears on Mary Anne's face. "Got any others up your sleeve?"

"Oh, you have no idea," Mary Anne said, matching her grin.

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